

Skyline Pigeon

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Summary: Twenty long years of working for both Civil Protection and the Resistance changes a person. Barney Calhoun has seen - and done - things that he never would've imagined, but he's always made it through, until he comes across one particular citizen that causes him to question everything he's ever allowed himself to believe. Oneshot.

Skyline Pigeon

****Disclaimer:** I still don't own Half-Life or any of its characters.**

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><p>"I am way too goddamn old for this," Barney Calhoun muttered, taking care not to speak loudly enough for his words to be audible through his Civil Protection mask. He gazed up at the dilapidated brick building towering over him, desperately trying to avoid thinking about why he was there. In reality, the former Black Mesa security guard was only forty-five years old, but two long decades spent under the Combine had a way of wearing even the strongest people down to nothing. Barney was acutely aware of the fact that he was no exception to the rule, and though he knew that everyone had it rough, he couldn't help thinking at times that he had to have it the worst of all. He always did his best to banish that train of thought as soon as it appeared, but it always lingered somewhere in the back of his mind, a dark cloud of doubt that he could not escape. It sure sucked to be a civilian, and it sucked even worse to work with the Resistance, but Barney didn't know of anyone else who spied for the Resistance as a member of the very organization that was in charge of making civilian life horrible in the first place... and was apparently damn good at it, too.

Sighing deeply, the metrocop grabbed his stun baton from where it was secured at his hip and followed a small herd of CPs through the

doorway of the crumbling apartment complex. He tried not to thinkâ€”not about why he was here, not about the uniform he was wearing, not about what it represented. He willed himself not to look at the citizens who peered down at him from aboveâ€”a mostly futile attempt to ignore their terrified, accusing stares that felt like hundreds of pins piercing his skin. As Barney had learned throughout the last twenty years, there was only one way to get through this job without breaking down: he had to become completely numb, pay no mind to what he was being asked to do... essentially, become a robot, just like the Combine expected him to be.

Barney strode down a dimly lit hallway, doing his best to ignore the suffocating feeling of dread that always seized his chest right before a job like this. Stiffly, he turned to the metrocop next to him, awaiting orders. The other cop motioned for Barney to follow him, leading him up a set of rickety metal stairs and then to the far end of the second-floor hallway. They came to a stop in between two apartment doors, both of which had clearly seen better days. _'We all have,'_ the sad voice in the back of Barney's head whispered. Barney grit his teeth, ignoring his own thoughts, steeling himself for the inevitable.

"That one," croaked the higher-ranking CP as he pointed to the door nearest to Barney, the vocoder in his mask disguising his real voiceâ€”ensuring that nobody would ever know who was underneath. Barney nodded, raised his fist, sucked in his breath, pounded on the door...

"Open up, Civil Protection!" he ordered, cringing at the sound of his own voice, evil and artificial, just like all the others. A human made to sound like a cold, heartless robot, carrying out the Combine's will. He still hadn't gotten used to it even after all this time, and at this point, it was doubtful that he ever would.

The doorknob turned and the door was hesitantly opened, revealing the occupants of the run-down apartmentâ€”a man who looked to be around 30 and a woman who was probably his wife, slumped on the couch in the background with tears pouring down her face. Barney addressed them. "Civil Protection requires you to vacate the premises immediately. Please exit through the main doors and await further instruction." He had long since lost count of how many times he had delivered these lines, but it never got any easier.

The man gasped. "But... officer... we were relocated to City 17 just two weeks ago. Why are we being moved again? Please..." He gestured to his crying wife and stared at Barney with pleading eyes, as if he hoped the person underneath the mask would have pity, would spare him, would risk his own life for that of a person he had never met.

"Please vacate the premises immediately," Barney repeated coldly. He was used to their begging by now and had learned not to let it phase him. One moment of hesitation, and... well, he simply couldn't risk being punished by the Combine, possibly being tortured. He knew too much about the Resistance to allow that to happen. He often wished... afterwards... that he could find some way to communicate this to his... victims... but obviously, that was not and would never be an option.

The citizen did not move, seeming rooted to the spot by a combination

of shock and despair. This was a common reaction, and Barney had been trained in how to respond. The former security brandished his stun baton and pressed the button to charge it. Blue sparks played over the business end of the weapon, a mesmerizing but potentially deadly display. Barney raised the glowing stick, a warning. In front of him, the man remained motionless, and the metrocop was left with no choice but to follow through with his threat. There was a buzzing noise as the electrified device whizzed through the air and made contact with the man's skin, and he fell to the floor, shaking. Barney took one threatening step forward, then another.

"Okay, okay, we're going!" the man screamed, rubbing his arm and looking up at Barney with that familiar look of wide-eyed terror. He scrambled to his feet, grabbed his wife's hand, and raced for the door. Barney moved to let them pass, then followed them, still holding his baton. Another metrocop eyed him suspiciously as he passed, and Barney, not one to take chances, prodded both citizens in the back and ordered them to move faster before he softly whispered an apology that he knew they could not hear. The other cop nodded, seeming pleased, and turned around to roughly grab another man by the wrist, smacking him with his own charged baton. Barney averted his eyes and continued walking, shutting out the sobs and screams of the citizens around him.

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><p>After depositing the terrified couple with two other metrocops who would be in charge of taking them to the train station for relocation, Barney turned abruptly on his heel, heading back inside. Another metrocop grabbed his arm as he passed. "Upstairs... top floor," he ordered. Barney complied wordlessly. He climbed several flights of stairs along with four other CPs and positioned himself in front of a door, ready to repeat the earlier process as many times as necessary until the building was clear. He took a deep breath and rapped sharply on the door. "Open up, Civil Protection!" he ordered yet again.<p>

The door did not open. Barney knocked again, yelling louder this time, and still received no answer. The little voice in the back of his head told him to move on, that the apartment was probably empty... but Civil Protection did not take chances. Barney chose to ignore his gut feeling, aware that some of the other CPs had stopped what they were doing to watch him. Observing, waiting. He had no choice now. Having never been in a situation like this before, he frantically searched his memory, trying to recall the protocol for this. After a moment's hesitation, the former security guard backed up a couple of steps and proceeded to kick the door down, wincing as a searing pain shot through his leg. However, despite the momentary agony, Barney grinned underneath his mask. He'd never gotten to do that before, and he felt pretty badass... until he remembered why he had done it in the first place.

The grin faded along with the pain, and Barney sighed, static sounding through his mask's vocoder. Recovering, he brandished his baton and rushed into the apartment, which seemed deserted and was almost completely devoid of any signs that a person had ever even lived there. He was vaguely aware of the sound of a couple of other CPs mumbling behind him, probably wondering what was going on. Their chatter got steadily louder, and Barney assumed they were excited by the possibility that there could be something out of the ordinary

going on here. Strange situations usually provided lots of people to subdue, which, of course, was the average metrocop's favorite part of the job. He shuddered.

"The door wasn't locked," a soft voice whispered from somewhere nearby. Very nearby.

Barney whirled around, jamming the charge button on his baton. He had walked right into a trap. 'Dammit,' he mentally cursed himself, 'how did I manage to fall for that?' Every hair on his body bristled with fear as his life briefly flashed before his eyes. However, when he located the source of the voice, he discovered that it had belonged to not an armed rebel, but an elderly woman. A very elderly woman—upon closer inspection, she appeared to be at least seventy, which was a shock in itself. People simply did not live to be that old anymore... nor did they usually want to. Barney felt a bit sheepish for a split second, remembering how he had been considering himself to be ancient just a short while ago.

"The door wasn't locked," the woman repeated mildly. "You didn't have to break it down."

Her voice was surprisingly steady, the loose folds of skin at her neck fluttering gently as she spoke. She was alone, perched on a rickety stool in an otherwise empty corner of the apartment, and appeared to be unarmed, much to Barney's relief. He slowly lowered his baton to his side, switching off the glowing blue electricity. Though he was painfully aware of the fact that he was supposed to be delivering the standard 'vacate the premises' speech right now, the metrocop found himself studying the elderly woman instead. Indeed, she was very old, with a huge cloud of white hair and deep, piercing blue eyes that seemed to be capable of seeing right through a person. Those eyes reminded Barney of his own grandmother, though Nana had died when he was only a teenager. The resemblance in their knowing stares made Barney more than a little nervous, so he abruptly averted his gaze from the woman's face and instead took note of the way she was sitting.

The old woman was seated on her stool with a manner about her that one could liken to that of a queen perched on her throne. Despite an accusing glint shining in her eyes, the rest of the woman's features were completely blank—in a calm, peaceful way, however, not like the haunted, empty expression that was typical of most other inhabitants of City 17. Instead of the denim uniform that all citizens were required to wear, this woman was dressed in what Barney figured had once been a flowing blue dress, though it was now patched and held together with what appeared to be silver strips of duct tape. She also seemed to be wearing blush and a hint of lipstick, as if she had dressed up for this occasion. The thought sent a chill running down his spine—who was this woman, and what did she want?

Snapping out of his thoughts, Barney straightened his back and raised his baton again. "Civil Protection requires you to vacate the premises immediately," he stated the familiar words. "Please exit through the main doorway on the first floor and await further instruction." The metrocop's fingers idly brushed against the baton's charge button as he waited for the woman to get up and head for the—well, where the door had once been. The woman turned to gaze directly at the CP towering above her, her expression completely calm

and almost... amused? "This is mandatory," he clarified, sucking in his breath. He took a couple of steps towards the door, hoping she'd take the hint. He really didn't want to have to brutalize this one, and he knew other CPs would probably be flooding into the small room at any moment. Once that happened, he would have no choice.

"No," the woman said.

Barney stopped and whirled around, certain he'd heard wrong. "Excuse me?" he choked out, glad for once that the mask's vocoder stripped his voice of nearly all emotion.

"I said no," the woman repeated, still eerily calm. "I'm not going."

"Do you not understand what 'mandatory' means?" Barney barked, stunned by this woman's... courage? Resolve? Foolishness?

"You can call it mandatory, you can call it required, you can call it whatever you want," she responded, a slight smile tugging at her lips. "But I have a choice, and I'm not going."

Barney had no idea how to respond to this. He wanted to grab her shoulders, shake her, and tell her that he was very sorry, but she did not have a choice. She had to go. If she didn't... he felt suddenly sick as he unwillingly imagined himself striking an unarmed 70 year old woman with his electrified baton, perhaps even to the point of killing her like other cops often did. He knew that was what was expected of him, and he could either do it, or he could be discovered as a double agent for the Resistance and killed right along with her. As he had been telling himself for all these years, he simply had no choice. Maybe she thought she did, but he did not.

Fear gripped Barney's chest as he heard footsteps approaching. The familiar authoritative stomp made by Civil Protection issue boots. Several of them. "What's taking so long?" croaked one metrocop, stepping through the splintered doorway. Barney could almost hear an evil grin cracking across the other cop's masked face as he registered the presence of the elderly woman. A second CP appeared behind the first and shoved past Barney, grabbing the woman's thin right wrist. "Come along," he growled, yanking her arm roughly, pulling the regal old woman from her throne.

"No," the woman replied in that calm, steady voice. Barney noticed with shock that she was... smiling? 'What the hell?' he thought, mind racing. This was usually the part where most people broke down, begging and pleading to be spared. This was different... this was weird. And why did it have to happen to him?

A third metrocop stepped through the doorway at her words, baton in hand. "You... will... go," he stated coldly, pausing for emphasis dragging out the words, as if he thought the woman was mentally challenged and needed help comprehending his statement. Actually, the explanation would've made a lot of sense to Barney, if not for the look in her eyes. 'Eyes are the windows to the soul,' his Nana's voice echoed in his head, and Barney shuddered. He had looked into this woman's eyes, and knew without a doubt that she knew exactly what she was saying and simply did not give a damn. In any other situation, Barney would've been impressed, but for now, he was just

scared. Scared that they would beat her, that he would have to watch, that she would blow his cover...

The woman did not go, much to Barney's increasing horror. "I am through cooperating with Civil Protection," she stated, staring the officer who gripped her arm right in the "well, eyeholes of his mask. Her gaze was serious, matter-of-fact, but not angry, despite her words. "I know who you are. Underneath those uniforms, you're just people. Like all the rest of us that you beat and order around spit on. You only think you have the authority to do that to us because you wanted to save yourselves. You took the easy way out. You don't care what you have to do, do you, as long as you get your precious gourmet meals? Your cushy apartment where people don't break down your door in the middle of the night and steal the only possessions you have left? Your freedom to walk the streets without being beaten or raped for no reason at all? Your pistols and glowing batons?" She paused, and Barney felt like he was going to throw up. He propped a hand on the windowsill to his right to keep his trembling knees from giving out.

"Well," the elderly woman continued, her tone becoming increasingly more forceful and her eyes sparkling with a hint of an emotion that Barney couldn't quite place, "was it worth it? You sold your souls... and those of millions of people that could've been your friends, your neighbors, your family... for material things that so many people are living without. Or would be living, anyhow, if you had enough decency to leave them alone. Their morals and loyalties that you so clearly lack shouldn't make them targets to be eliminated." She straightened her back and tipped her chin upwards, looking once again like a queen addressing her subjects, her body language almost daring Civil Protection to argue with her.

Barney wondered what the cop she was facing was thinking, if he was thinking at all. Were there others on his side, or was he the only CP on earth who still had the decency to feel like shit for his selfish choices? The elderly woman's words had been a verbal punch in the gut, the first confirmation he'd heard in nearly twenty years of working for Civil Protection that the citizens knew exactly who was underneath the masks and hated every metrocop they saw with an unsurpassed passion that Barney knew he deserved. He had been one of them at some point, but had chosen to give up a piece of his humanity for a little extra food and a bed that had a frame. Even his service to the Resistance was not enough to make up for his decision, and Barney knew that if he lived to see the end of Combine rule, he would never be able to enjoy it. He had witnessed "and done" too many horrible things to ever walk among humans again without breaking down like the goddamn coward that he was. Tears were suddenly threatening to spill over, and he silently willed them away, setting his jaw. He couldn't deal with this now. Just couldn't.

A heavy silence blanketed the apartment for a few long moments, and then the wheeze of a Combine vocoder broke the silence. Barney could not be sure which metrocop was about to speak "another eerie thing about the masks. God, he hated the masks. "You... will... obey." The words were a last warning, and when one of the metrocops raised a sparking baton, Barney knew which one had uttered the words. His stomach seized up, and he had to fight to keep his breakfast down "the breakfast that he earned by willingly agreeing to kill his own people, if necessary. He hated himself more in that moment than he thought he ever had before, and though he knew what was about

to happenâ€"had done it himself, many timesâ€"he could not watch.

"No", the woman answered yet again, and Barney registered a wide grin creasing her wrinkled face, her gaze lifting towards the ceilingâ€"or perhaps to Godâ€"and the sickening crackle of a baton whizzing through the air before he squeezed his eyes shut. The darkness was a blessing, but of course, the helmet offered no way for him to cover his ears. He winced as he heard the baton connect with the woman's skin, but she still remained stoically silent. He wondered if she had flinched at all, even the slightest bit.

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><p>After an eternity, Barney finally summoned the courage to open his eyes. One of the other copsâ€"he could no longer remember which one was whichâ€"was standing directly in front of him, and everything visible about the other CP's body language suggested that he was about to lose his patience with his fellow officer. Barney nodded, a typical way of showing respect and acknowledgment to another CP. The other cop grunted, seeming satisfied enough. He leaned in towards Barney, as if he was about to confide a secret of some sort. Barney struggled to remember how to breathe.<p>

"We have other... business... to attend to elsewhere," the other cop rasped. "We need to... hurry this up." Before he could register what was going on, Barney felt something cold and metallic being pressed into his hand. He looked down, and with a sinking feeling that reached the deepest pit of his stomach, realized it was a Colt Python. A revolver. He didn't need to have its purpose spelled out for him. Instinctively, he nearly reached out his other arm in search of something to hold on to, to keep himself from passing out or vomiting as the full weight of what he was about to do crushed him from within. _'No...'_ he thought helplessly. Over the other metropol's shoulder, the woman continued to smile... mocking him, in a way.

In that instant, Barney almost hated her. She had the one thing he would never, ever be able to have againâ€"a clean conscience. She would dieâ€"very soon, in factâ€"with the knowledge that she had never caused another human pain. She had never betrayed her own people. She would die knowing exactly who she was and exactly what she believed in, instead of being trapped between two causes like Barney had been for the last twenty years. His head was spinning with the weight of who he was... what he had done... what he was about to do. _'Do not hate those who have what you have willingly given up'_ , Nana's voice whispered in his head. Barney fought the urge to shake his head, to silence the voice of reason that was going to give him away as he choked back tears. He stared at the elderly woman through the dark eyeholes of his mask for the longest time, until a harsh command jarred him from his thoughts.

"Shoot her," croaked one of the other cops as he stepped back to watch. "_Civil Protection_ doesn't stand for this kind of insubordination. This foolishness. But you know that." He nodded towards the woman, a clear signal to get on with it. Barney simply took it all in, numb and unable to move, though he knew he had to. The emphasis he could have sworn he heard on the phrase 'Civil Protection' absolutely terrified him. '_Oh God... they know_', he thought, unable to suppress a small shiver of horror this time.

Seconds later, the full weight of his situation hit once again, along with a new horrible realization. "This is a _test_," he involuntarily whispered out loud as the shock took hold, softly enough that he was almost sure it hadn't been audible through his mask... hopefully.

He quickly turned around at the sound of a noise behind him. The other cops were standing in a line, blocking the only exit. _'Is this to keep her in here... or me?_' Barney thought, still terrified of being exposed. One of the cops made a sound that had probably been a cough before his mask's vocoder distorted it, and another began slowly tapping his foot. They were clearly expecting Barney to act soon, and he was running out of time to... to what? _'To save her?_' he thought, though he knew that was impossible. There was nowhere to go... and even if there was, Civil Protection would find them. They always found people. Always. There was simply no way out of this.

"Shoot her!" ordered one of the other metrocops, yet again. Louder this time, and angrier. Quickly, Barney gripped and raised the revolver, pointing it towards the proud old woman. She was still perched on her stool, directing her all-knowing gaze right at the cop who stood before her... a look he knew he would never forget, even if he lived to be as old as she was. At the moment, however, he had no desire to continue existing. _'I have a choice,'_ the old woman's words echoed in his head. _'I have a choice.'_ But Barney knew he didn't. He fought back hot tears of guilt and anger as he fully understood how trapped he was... what he would have to sacrifice in order to protect himself and his knowledge of the Resistance.

_ 'I'm sorry,' _he thought, wishing he could voice his apology to his... victim. He knew 'sorry' wasn't nearly enough, but there were no words to express what he was currently feeling... not in any language that he knew of. _ 'I'm sorry Nana... I'm sorry Gordon... I'm sorry Eli...I'm so, so sorry...' _

Somewhere during his long string of mental apologies, Barney realized that he would never be the same after this. He had brutalized people before... he had killed people before. But this was different. This woman... he would never forget her, and he would never be able to walk among Civil Protection _or_ the Resistance without thinking about her. The horrible Thing he was about to do would forever alienate him from any group on Earth that could possibly accept him. As he pondered this, Barney also slipped his finger over the trigger of the gun. _'At least it will be quick,'_ he thought, a futile attempt to justify his actions in some way. _ 'At least she won't suffer.' _

"Forgive me," he whispered so softly that it was almost inaudible, even to his own ears—a selfish request if there ever was one, but it was something he could not keep himself from wanting. For a brief instant, he could swear that he saw the old woman's expression change, ever so slightly. The peaceful smile got a little wider, and something glinted in her eyes. Something kind, as if she had heard him. As if she understood.

Then, almost imperceptibly, she nodded, and once again, she lifted her gaze to the ceiling above her. _'God, take care of her,'_ Barney thought, knowing He would. This woman deserved nothing less. Behind him, a stun baton sparked to life, and he had a feeling that the woman wasn't its intended target. With one last silent apology, the

defeated metrocop aimed the gun at the old woman's head. He held his breath. He fired.

And then it was all over for both of them.

* * *

><p>Author's note: I realize that this is a bit dark... perhaps darker than many of you like, and I'm sorry about that. For what it's worth though, I did have some inspiration.

This is loosely based on a scene in *Among the Free*, the final book in the *Shadow Children* series by Margaret Peterson Haddix. I don't know how many people are familiar with her books, but even though they're fairly easy to read, they're also extremely complicated, well-thought-out stories. This particular series has always reminded me of *Half-Life* (and vice-versa), and I would encourage you to look into reading it.

In the scene that inspired this story, the main character is in a similar situation to Barney—he's one of the people the government is trying to destroy, working undercover and thus being forced to harm others—and I've been meaning to write this for quite some time. (Spoiler) The scene in the book ends a bit differently than this story does... but since it's written for middle schoolers, that's probably to be expected.

As for the title of this story, *Skyline Pigeon* is an Elton John song (yes, I really like sappy Elton John piano ballads, if that's not apparent by now) that seemed to fit the mood of this story and reveals a bit more about the old woman's personality and rationale for her actions. Originally, this story was a lot longer (I have a problem with being wordy), and she made a brief reference to the song at one point, but in the end, it didn't make sense to leave that in there.

Anyway, reviews are welcome and constructive criticism is encourage. Thanks for reading.

End
file.